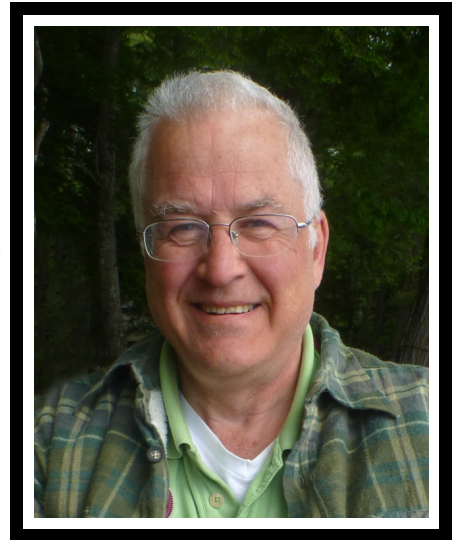


When George Zeller Became a Fisher of Men

*His testimony as shared at a FISHERS OF MEN Supper Meeting
at The Church of the Open Bible, Burlington MA
Tuesday Sept. 26, 1978*

Ten years ago, in the Fall of 1968, I entered the freshman class of Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut. During this time the Vietnam conflict was continuing and of course there was a great deal of student concern and unrest. This was also the time when the outward appearance of college students began to drastically change, as far as dress and hair length. For example, if you were to look at my high school year book, 1968, you would see a fine group of well-dressed students with conservative hair cuts. If you could then look at those same students in 1972, four years later at their college graduation, you would see an amazing difference.



George W. Zeller

Not only was Wesleyan University transformed by the appearance of its students, but it was also transformed sexually. I entered college at the time when the co-educational trend was just beginning. I entered an all-male university, but it wasn't long before women began to infiltrate the ranks. One girl in the middle of a class of 50 male students is easily noticed! By the time I graduated, Wesleyan was well on its way to being co-educational (in fact, we now have three Wesleyan students who faithfully attend the Middletown Bible Church, and they are all girls!).

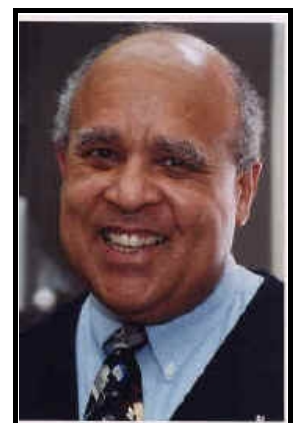
I share these things to give you some idea of the atmosphere that existed on the Wesleyan Campus when I entered as a naive freshman 10 years ago. I'm sure that all of you men tonight remember what the mood was back then in the late 60s.

There I was, in the middle of this environment, in the middle of this university (in the middle of Connecticut, in Middletown), and yet as it turned out, I can honestly say my first year at Wesleyan proved to be the most important, the most eventful year of my life. To explain this, I would like to describe three things of great consequence that happened to me that year.

First of all, I met a fellow freshman from Philadelphia, named Steve. Now, when you go away to school and leave home for the first time, it's important to develop some new friendships, and Steve turned out to be one of the friendliest



fellows I had ever met. I appreciated this, and yet, I began to be suspicious of him. I noticed that he always seemed to be smiling—a peculiar abnormality indeed! Also, when we ate together in the beautiful, large dining hall, I noticed that Steve would quietly bow his head in prayer before eating. That seemed like pious extremism to me. All the other men, including myself, took one look at the food and dug right in. And when we got bored of eating we invented other activities. Food fights were not uncommon. I remember one night spaghetti, tomato sauce and meatballs could be seen every-



Steve Thorpe

where, flying through the air, getting tangled up in students' hair and all over everything, as a full scale war was going on between the students and the kitchen crew. And yet, there was Steve, in the midst of this type of hostile atmosphere; and no matter with whom he sat, he never failed to quietly bow his head and silently acknowledge that the food he was about to partake of was provided from the gracious hand of His God and His Creator. And that simple act of giving thanks for food was something I never forgot!



After several weeks, I began to learn more about Steve. To my surprise, I discovered that he claimed to believe the Bible, from Genesis to Revelation. To my knowledge, he was the first Bible believer I had ever met, and I was 18 years old. I had never heard of such a thing. Everyone knows that there's much we can learn from the Bible, but certainly it's not a book to be believed in its totality. And yet, Steve took the Bible seriously and he believed it—he believed every word of it.

When Steve told me that God literally created Adam and Eve, just as it's recorded in Genesis chapters 1 and 2, I was amazed! I thought the creation of Adam and Eve was a nice story with perhaps some spiritual lessons for us, but here was someone who actually believed in the historicity of Adam and Eve, that Adam and Eve were real historical people, created directly by God, the first parents of the human race. I couldn't understand how anyone living in a scientific age could take the Genesis account seriously.

I was a convinced evolutionist. In fact, I didn't know that there was any other alternative. I just assumed because of all that I was taught and all that I ever read, that life as we know it today came about, not by the powerful word of an Almighty Creator, but by natural processes through millions of years of time. I believed that all the plants and animals that we know today had developed from lifeless chemicals formed in a primitive ocean, and these original, simple one celled organisms gradually evolved into more and more complex organisms— from invertebrates to fish, to amphibians, to reptiles, to mammals. From these evolved certain ape-like creatures who after thousands of years finally evolved into men! And by faith in what I had been taught and what I had read, I believed that all this happened not by the God of the Bible, but by the god of chance, by “accidents of nature,” by freak, chance mutations, which is the proposed dynamic for evolutionary change. And yet, there was Steve, who seemed to be a hangover from the Dark Ages, who believed in the Biblical account of Creation and who actually took the book of Genesis seriously! That was very hard for me to swallow!

As I got to know Steve better, he also shared with me his belief in the Second Coming of Christ. To me this was a brand-new idea. In all my years of going to church, week after week, Sunday after Sunday, no one had ever told me that the Lord Jesus would some day come back again. Of course, Jesus Himself said, “I will come again” and both the Old and New Testaments have much to say about the Second Coming of the Messiah. I was never taught this, but Steve believed it because the Scripture said it, and I simply had to scratch my head in amazement!

One thing about Steve impressed me more than anything else. Steve claimed that the Lord Jesus Christ was His personal Saviour from sin. He told me that he believed that Christ died on the cross for his sins and died in his place and took upon Himself the punishment that he deserved. I couldn't understand this. I knew, because of my religious background, that the Lord had died on the cross, but how could anyone say, “He died for me!”? The liberal Congregational church that I grew up in never taught me the significance of the death and crucifixion of the Lord Jesus Christ.

I can remember when I was a high school student that I once picked up Bobby Richardson's autobiography. He was a great second baseman for the New York Yankees, that despicable team that has recently passed the beloved Red Sox for first place! [This was the year Bucky Dent's famous home run would end the Red Sox's season.] As I read the Bobby Richardson story, he also claimed to know the Lord as His personal Saviour, and he mentioned the fact that Christ died for His sins! I read that, but I didn't understand it. And then a couple of years later, I meet Steve, and he tells me the same thing. I didn't understand it, but I didn't forget it either. I didn't agree with all of Steve's beliefs, but there was one thing I couldn't deny, and that was the kind of life that he lived.

By the way, many of you have met and know the Steve I have been talking about. His name is Stephen Thorpe, and he was one of your guests at your last missionary conference here at The Church of the Open Bible.

Now, permit me to mention a second factor of great import to me that freshman year of college. I enrolled in a course on the New Testament taught by an unbelieving professor, who did not even believe the New Testament which he taught. If you want to destroy the faith of a young person, one thing that might help is to send him to a secular university and tell him to take as many courses in the religion department as possible. But I'm thankful it doesn't always work that way. In my case, God used such a course, taught in the atmosphere of unbelief, to convince me of the absolute truthfulness and reliability of the Bible.

So I was enrolled in this New Testament class, and to my dismay, our first assignment was to read the entire New Testament. How unreasonable could my professor be? Why should I waste my valuable time reading through all the letters of Paul and Peter and James and Jude and John? Everyone knows that only the Gospel accounts are important because there we find the words of the Lord Jesus Himself. You see, I sort of had a "red-letter edition" mentality, that only the words in red, only the words of Jesus were really important. After all, who cares what Paul had to say? It's what Jesus said that counts. At any rate, I submitted to the authority of my professor and grudgingly began plowing through the letters of Paul and the rest of the New Testament.

An amazing thing happened! The more I read, the more I was impressed and struck by the authority of those words! These were men who spoke with authority. These were men who wrote as if they knew what they were talking about. These New Testament writers were not just sharing their opinions or feelings or religious ideas, but these were men who were speaking and writing with authority as if their message came from God Himself! As I read, I began to underline verses that really spoke to my heart: Rom. 5:8; Rom. 6:23; 1 Cor. 15:3-4; Heb. 9:27 ("It is appointed unto men once to die, and after this the judgement."); 1 John 5:11-12 ("This is the record that God hath given to us eternal life.").

The Word of God was beginning to have an impact upon my life. And you'll notice I said "The Word of God, not the word of Paul or Peter or John." The Word of God was beginning to have an impact upon my life.

The third thing that was of great consequence to my life was another assignment that I was given for this same New Testament course. Here's where my professor made a fatal mistake. He gave me an assignment to do a research paper on the Gospel of John. My topic was to discuss the relationship between Christ and the Father, as set forth in the Gospel of John.

Without knowing what would happen, I began to study through this Gospel, verse by verse, chapter

by chapter! And by the way, if any of you men here tonight would like to begin reading the Bible, I would suggest that you start with the Gospel of John and read it completely through. The reason John wrote that Gospel was so that you might believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that believing you might have life through His name! I'm sure that the people here at The Church of the Open Bible would be happy to give you a copy of the Gospel of John (in fact, I have some with me).

As I carefully studied through the Gospel of John, one truth hit me like a clap of thunder, something that was never really made clear to me before, *namely*, that Jesus Christ claimed to be God, and that His relationship to the Father was nothing less than equality. I read verses such as this: John 1:1,3,14; John 5:18; John 8:58; John 10:30; John 20:28 (When Doubting Thomas saw the risen Lord and he became convinced Thomas, and he fell before Him and said, "My Lord and my God.").

For the first time in my life it dawned on me that God Himself, the Creator of the universe, actually became a man and died on the cross for a lost and sinful person as myself, taking upon Himself the judgment and punishment which I deserved. I'm the one who should have been nailed to that cross. I'm the one who is sinful. I'm the one who is guilty. I'm the one who should be punished. But my Saviour suffered and bled and died, instead of me, in my place, as my Substitute.

I still have the research paper which I turned in to my professor. Let me read to you my conclusion to this paper:

For all practical purposes, Jesus was God. It was God that assumed the bodily form of a man. It was God that walked among sinful men with love in his heart. It was God who showed men the way of salvation and of brotherhood. It was God that loved the world so much that He came to this world in order that He might suffer and die to show mankind how much He really cared. It was God who was nailed to the cross and who carried on His shoulders all the sins of the world. Yes, it was God who came down to man so that man might believe and come up to Him.

Now I'm sure that theologically that could be expressed in a more accurate and clear way, but at that time I wasn't a theologian. I was a freshman student whose heart was beginning to delight in a Great God and in the good news found in the Bible. My professor wasn't quite so delighted. He wrote this comment: "As a whole the paper is almost impossible to evaluate because it is not clear when it is confessional and when more or less academic . . . Your conclusion is a real puzzler!" He gave me a B-/C+ (whatever that means). But I couldn't care less about the grade! God was dealing with my heart through His Word and opening my eyes to His truth so that for the first time I understood that Jesus Christ was more than a mere man, or a fine teacher or a moral example. He was the Creator-God who took upon Himself a human body, died to provide a perfect salvation for sinful men, and who rose in triumph from the tomb and is alive forever more, and who is able to give eternal life to all those who will put their complete trust in Him and in Him alone. For there is none other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved!

Now it's nearly 10 years later, and as I stand before this group of men, I can truthfully say that the Lord Jesus Christ is my personal Saviour, my Lord and Master, my Creator and my God. And I can also say that I came to a saving knowledge of Christ and entered into a saving relationship with Him through the faithful life and testimony of a fellow freshman student who loved the Lord and believed His Word and through my own reading of the New Testament as I considered the authoritative statements of the apostles, men who personally witnessed the life and power of a risen Saviour, and through my own reading of the Gospel of John in which I discovered the claims of Christ as to who He really is and what He really did. As a result I became a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, and Jesus

Himself said, (John 6:47) “Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that believeth on Me hath everlasting life.”

Tonight you may be here in unbelief, even as I was once in unbelief. The Lord said, “He that is not with Me is against Me.” You’re either for Christ, or you are against Him. There’s no place for neutrality here. You can’t be half a believer and half an unbeliever! You’re either a believer in Christ or you are not. You have either received Christ as your Saviour by faith or you are presently rejecting Him. You are either saved or you are unsaved. You either have eternal life or you are dead in sin, and in danger of eternal judgment. The Bible says, “He that has the Son has life and he that does not have the Son of God does not have life.” If you don’t have Christ, you are lifeless, you are spiritually dead, you are lost and in desperate need, even as I was on the campus of Wesleyan University 10 years ago. And the same God who reached down to me in grace and saved me—not according to works of righteousness which I had done, but according to His sheer mercy He saved Me—that same God is able and willing to save all those who come to Him, and acknowledge their sinfulness and guilt before a holy God; and who put their trust in the One who came into the world to save sinners. Jesus said (John 6:37) the person who comes to Me I will never, ever cast out!

If you are here tonight in unbelief, I challenge you to search the Scriptures, to read the Gospel of John, and to see whether these things are so. I’m not asking you to believe my word. I’m asking you and urging you to believe the Word of God. Jesus said, (John 5:24) “Verily, verily, I say unto you, he that heareth My word, and believeth on Him that sent Me, hath everlasting life, and shall not come into condemnation; but is passed from death unto life.”

There’s one more thing that I should mention that happened to me that freshman year. This had nothing to do with my salvation experience, but it had everything to do with my subsequent Christian life and development. In the Spring of my freshman year, on Mother’s Day, Steve and I saw a sign which said, “To the Middletown Bible Church.” We followed the sign and attended that church, and we have been attending there ever since. For the first time in my life, I was in a church where the Bible was honored, believed and taught. I learned more in that church about truth and living and why I am here, where I’ve come from and where I am going than I could have ever learned if I had attended Wesleyan University for 40 years.

Those of you who live in the Burlington area are privileged to have a solid, Bible-believing, Bible preaching, Bible teaching church in your midst, very similar to the one I attend in Middletown. Sadly, there are not many churches like this, so I would encourage you to take full advantage of the ministry here at The Church of the Open Bible, not only for your sake, but for the sake of your entire family.

Tonight I have said a great deal about the Gospel of John. In closing, I would like to read the second to the last verse found in this Gospel, written by John, the human author (John 21:24): “This is the disciple which testifieth of these things, and wrote these things: and we know that his testimony is true.”

~~Prayer

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Children’s Bible Ministry of Connecticut, USA
“Mister Steve” (Stephen Thorpe)
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